

Review: Paul Downes (2020): Reconstructing Agency in Developmental and Educational Psychology - Inclusive Systems as Concentric Space

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Nielsen, B. L. (2020). Review: Paul Downes (2020): Reconstructing Agency in Developmental and Educational Psychology - Inclusive Systems as Concentric Space. [Review of the book *Reconstructing agency in developmental and educational psychology: inclusive systems as concentric space*, by P. Downes]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 21(2), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.2.3480>

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Review:

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Paul Downes (2020). Reconstructing Agency in Developmental and Educational Psychology—Inclusive Systems as Concentric Space.

New York, NY: Routledge; 252 pages, ISBN: 978-1-138-15885-6 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-315-10108-8 (ebk); £120.00/ £22.50

Key words:

agency; spatial
systems;
concentric space;
transitions;
emotional-
relational turn;
phenomenology

Abstract: In this article, I present a review of Paul DOWNES' (2020) book "Reconstructing Agency in Developmental and Educational Psychology—Inclusive Systems as Concentric Space." DOWNES describes the goal of this impressive work as the reconstruction of the foundations of developmental and educational psychology that fills in an important gap by arguing for a spatial turn. He proposes an innovative framework of agency seen as a movement between concentric and diametric spatial relations for a reconstruction of resilience. I present an overview of the structure and the content of the book followed by discussing in more detail the four themes: 1. key problems of agency, 2. the emotional-relational turn, 3. VYGOTSKY and the question about cultural conformity, and 4. the proposed spatial ecological systems framework, as both a domain of study and a methodology. In the discussion, I add perspectives from the field of teacher education and professional learning and agency.

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1. Introduction

I will begin this review by quoting from the introduction: "[a] different conception of development, not relying on organismic assumptions of growth, is possible. This is one that examines development in terms of spatial movements, whether at the level of the individual or wider systems" (DOWNES, p.3). Here the author is setting the scene for this impressive work. [1]

Throughout the book, DOWNES refers to a very broad base of research and literature; in his own words, uncovering how foundational concepts of developmental and educational psychology are imbued with spatial assumptions. This is an erudite work of reconstructing and reconceptualizing foundational assumptions, standing on the shoulders of tradition and referring to many years of empirical research but, at the same time, presented with a sharpness of argumentation and a unique freshness that makes the reader aware that this is in no way just another book about education and development. I would not say it is an easy read, but it is for sure very rewarding. Throughout the book, we are provided with many examples of how to understand central educational and psychological questions in terms of concentric and diametric spatial systems; for example, questions related to early school leaving. Furthermore, the book has inspired me as a researcher in the field of teacher education and professional learning to see this approach as a kind of "thinking technology," to be used also in educational areas not covered by the examples in the book. [2]

Before moving on to further reflections, we need to start with the basic conceptualization, which is presented at the beginning of the book, namely as the difference between thinking in diametric dualism, illustrated as two connected squares separated by a line, or concentric dualism, illustrated as two circles, one embedded in the other (p.10). The author highlights this with examples from the field of educational research, illustrating how diametrical spatial opposition and mirror-image inverted symmetry, as in the two squares, underpin the us/them structure described in educational research as the process of othering: "The other becomes a reification, a static category rendered passive and inert in this role as mere object of the gaze from the vantage point of the supposed norm" (p.6). DOWNES continues to argue that such diametric spatial opposition presupposes division and separation between the individual and the environment opposite to the more ecological model of presenting one circle in the other—a representation that, in itself, challenges a diametric spatial framing precondition. [3]

The concentric spatial model from BRONFENBRENNER (1979), with the microsystem level embedded in circles of meso-, macro- and exo-systems, is referred to throughout the book with the aim of going beyond BRONFENBRENNER, adding an agential dynamism in a new dynamic system theoretical framework that also highlights individual responsibility and agency within the totality of the system (see also DOWNES, 2014, where the phrase "Beyond Bronfenbrenner" is explicitly used in the title). [4]

From this short introduction, I continue to provide a brief description of the book's structure and content (Section 2). After that, I discuss in more depth four themes from the book, including the framework as a methodology (Section 3). This is followed by some minor recommendations (Section 4), and concluding remarks and perspectives. [5]

2. Book Structure

Part I of the book contains three chapters, setting the scene and presenting the general thinking about a spatial turn for developmental and educational psychology, and agency as movement between concentric and diametric spatial systems. In the introduction, DOWNES highlights that this is a proposal based on systemic thinking that acknowledges human agency and meaning making. It is emphasized that meaning is in the relations, in the contrasting relative differences rather than in either space considered in isolated, absolute, atomistic, or essentialist terms. [6]

The discussion about the nature of agency, later elaborated in Chapter 3 of the book, is also initiated here. DOWNES states that

"debates regarding agency tend to operate within dualities of polar oppositions. One such duality is the somewhat tired debate between agency as reason (modernist freedom) and the collapse of reason into culture, with an ossification of agency through reason being conditioned by socio-cultural forces (postmodernist denial of agency)" (p.16). [7]

The header of Chapter 2 begins with the words "Beyond Empty Western Space." Here, the scene for the spatial turn is elaborated stating that "this proposed spatial ecological systems framework is resonant with the spatial turn led by the discipline of geography" (p.31). With reference to the author's previous work (DOWNES, 2011), the argument refers to challenging Western Eurocentric assumptions of empty, homogenous space; for example, with inspiration from other fields of research. [8]

In Part II, DOWNES discusses spatial transitions for inclusive systems in five chapters referring, for example, to resilience, early school leaving prevention, the emotional-relational turn, and a spatial hermeneutic approach to systems change. These chapters are based on a richness of empirical examples from the author's own research and from other sources of internationally acknowledged research. What the author calls the emotional-relational turn is elaborated in Section 3.2, but here is an illustration of how the system levels from BRONFENBRENNER (1979) are frequently used in the argumentation. DOWNES is referring to a critique from ECCLESTONE and HAYES (2009) that a focus on social and emotional education by supporting people in enduring stress and pressure can displace a necessary focus on macrostructural inequalities. He answers the critique:

"A both/and model is needed [...]. A focus on supporting parenting styles in a cultural and contextually sensitive manner is far from being antithetical to a call for greater macrosystemic structural equality. The micro and mesosystems of interaction cannot be written out of developmental psychology [...] in favour of a simply sociological level of explanation" (DOWNES, p.143). [9]

Finally, Part III consists of two chapters where DOWNES discusses concentric and diametric spaces as deep structures of experience. Here, a short quote from Chapter 9 about spatial-phenomenology where the author very precisely formulates the connection between the system and meaning for/experience of the humans as embedded in this: "Space is the neglected intermediary between structure and meaning" (p.196). One of the examples used in this final discussion challenges the way the classical pedagogical thinking of VYGOTSKY (1978 [1930]) can be applied, signaling consensus regarding criteria for evaluating knowledge, truth and experience, and thereby cultural conformity (DOWNES, p.229). This is elaborated in Section 3.3. [10]

A very thorough list of notes and references follows each of the ten chapters in the book, so in each chapter the author provides us with an argument in itself, and together the threads are gathered in a solidly backed argumentation ending in Table 10.1 with a summary of key hypotheses for concentric and diametric spaces (p.240). [11]

From this brief overview, I continue to discuss a few examples of insights from the book. I am aware that these examples do not do justice to the full richness of the book, but in this way, I have the chance to dwell on just some of the many interesting issues raised in the continual development of the hypotheses for concentric and diametric spaces. [12]

3. Insights and Reflections

My choice has been to elaborate more on four themes from the book. The first three sections below refer to a particular selection from each of the three parts of the book. Additionally, in the last section I address research methodological questions related to the spatial ecological systems framework. [13]

3.1 Key problems of agency (Part I)

The title of Chapter 3 is "Agency as Movement Between Concentric and Diametric Spatial Systems" with the sub-title "Key Problems of Agency." As mentioned above, DOWNES sets out to challenge what he calls the somewhat sterile debate between reason and culture regarding agency, or the lack thereof. He claims that both space and systems as backgrounds are blind spots for a psychology of agency and argues on behalf of a spatial systemic understanding of agency (p.58). [14]

As an educational researcher using the conceptualization of "professional agency" in research into teachers' professional learning, I am very inspired by this

chapter. When implementing large-scale professional development initiatives for school staff, for example, in the field of social-emotional education, it is crucial to design for empowerment and professional agency among the school professionals (see, e.g., NIELSEN, 2020). From the perspective of experimental research, it can be tempting to instruct the participating teachers about fidelity to the given program, sometimes nearly addressing them like puppets on a string, to secure the expected outcomes at the student level and the experimental conditions. However, as emphasized in a review by DURLAK and DuPRE (2008), the adaptations made by the professionals when implementing a particular social and emotional learning program can be the most important factor for program success. This might be the most provocative finding of their review, as they state it themselves. In this context, the recommendation from DOWNES in the reviewed book and in previous work (DOWNES, 2014) is highlighting the need to examine multi-person systems of interactions when analyzing the effects of reform initiatives. It is, for example, elaborated how a supporting conditions analysis can help capture this in-betweenness as part of agency for system change (DOWNES, p.61). [15]

The author is arguing that the problem of difference for agency involves two aspects, both the cultural dope problem and the exclusion problem (p.65). The cultural dope question asks how the individual can escape sheer cultural conditioning from macrosystem cultural forces, and the author argues that this is still somewhat neglected in developmental and educational psychology. This claim is certainly backed by reference to a wide range of sources from philosophy and research in psychology, and referring to, for example, research such as BURMAN (2008) deconstructing the child-centered approaches and treating the macrosystem, and the cultural conditioning, as the key site of interest. I agree with the author that an ecological systems theory is needed considering both the power in systems and the capacity to challenge cultural conditioning. However, I could add that there are, in the particular field of discussing professional agency, examples of other more ecological models of agency (ETELÄPELTO, VÄHÄSANTANEN, HÖKKÄ & PALONIEMI, 2013; PRIESTLEY, BIESTA & ROBINSON, 2015) that might have been included in the argumentation in the chapter. [16]

I end this short reflection by mentioning, but not discussing further, the other of the two aspects of difference referred to by the author, the exclusion problem. In the chapter, it is discussed, for example, with reference to othering in terms of gender, race and class. [17]

3.2 The emotional-relational turn (Part II)

One of the aspects raised in the second part of the book is what DOWNES calls the emotional-relational turn. In Chapter 6, he provides the background for talking about such a turn, and in Chapter 7, he continues to discuss in more detail emotional-relational supports for early school leaving. [18]

The author describes six key developments in the past decade illustrating an acceleration of focus on emotions in education: 1. the growing recognition of the long-term effects of school bullying on mental health, physical health, and early school leaving, 2. increased recognition of the potential of social-emotional education, 3. challenge to the neglect of emotional-relational dimensions in OECD publications, 4. the growing international movement giving emphasis to children and young peoples' wellbeing and voices, 5. a policy recognition of the need for systems strategies to address complex needs of children and young people, and 6. a principle of the differentiated need to recognize different layers of complexity building on public health models and prevention. [19]

DOWNES states that "an emotional-relational turn includes heightened awareness of the need to address authoritarian teaching and teacher conflict resolution skills, to prevent students being alienated from school" (p.130) and continues to discuss how many school students refer to a sense of isolation and lack of personal, meaningful relations as contributing to academic failure. [20]

Additionally, to be a part of the overall argumentation in the book, these chapters in themselves provide a very thorough insight into the field of social-emotional education (SEE). Based on my involvement in SEE with a particular focus on the school staff in the European project [Hand in Hand](#) (NIELSEN, 2020; NIELSEN et al., 2019), I would say that this is an agenda that is absolutely needed. I might even dare to claim that a relational revolution in schools is needed. Hence, in particular, I notice the emphasis on relations. Relational competences are not emphasized that clearly in all international research in the field of SEE. In the "Hand in Hand" project we have used the definition of a teacher's relational competence as

"[t]he professional's ability to 'see' the individual child on its own terms and attune teacher behavior accordingly without giving up leadership, as well as the ability to be authentic in the contact with the child. And as the professional's ability and will to take full responsibility for the quality of the relation" (JUUL & JENSEN, 2017, p.149). [21]

The title of the book from which this definition is taken includes the phrase "a new culture of education," and I would say that DOWNES's contribution is putting intellectual energy into such a new culture. [22]

3.3 VYGOTSKY and the question of cultural conformity (Part III)

The third theme I take from the book, due to my interest in teacher education and professional learning, is the discussion about limitations in VYGOTSKY's zone of proximal development (1978 [1930]). Throughout my career in education, since starting as a student teacher 40 years ago, comparing and contrasting the theories of PIAGET and VYGOTSKY have been a repeated issue raised by the novices being enculturated into the field of pedagogy. I, therefore, noticed this discussion in particular when reviewing the book. DOWNES starts the argument with the traditional comparison stating that "in contrast to Piaget's emphasis on internal cognitive structures, Vygotsky focused more on the dynamic role of the social environment to stimulate the range of potentials of zone of proximal development (ZPD) of the child" (p.226). The author continues to emphasize the ZPD as spatial, as it is exactly conceptualized as a zone, stating that parallels between Vygotskian thought and postmodern assumptions are highlighted not only to situate a key role for space but also to argue for a common weakness in both postmodern and Vygotskian thought regarding cultural conformity. Referring to the ZPD presumes that a more skilled or competent other can be clearly ascertained. This may, as the author argues, apply to convergent problems where the answer is fixed, relatively simple, and value-free, but for more complex problems, the ZPD breaks down, as the identification of the more skilled other may be more a social construct than a statement of fact. The discussion includes a reference to the author's previous work (DOWNES, 2009). It is unfolded in a clear and logical way that I am sure my student teachers would find very interesting (though some parts of the book might be a big mouthful for the average student teacher). The author writes,

"[p]romotion of experiential resources to resist peer group conditioning and enhanced capacity for communication with self and other, as parts of development of individual identity, are arguable key goals of an education system attuned to the needs and lived experience of children and young people" (DOWNES, p.230). [23]

I could add that this is surely also the case when developing your teacher identity as a novice. And just to add, the ZPD is also being used in some research to discuss the zone of proximal *teacher* development (e.g., WARFORD, 2011). The danger of cultural conformity is certainly highly relevant when discussing enculturation of the novice teachers at the schools out there, and the complexity of the competencies needed when making professional choices leads back to the arguments above about professional agency. [24]

3.4 The framework as a methodology

This final reflection addresses the methodological question. In the words of DOWNES, "[t]he proposed spatial ecological systems framework is both a domain of study and a methodology" (p.49). Hence, this is implicitly a book about methodology, though not at all a method book with tools and specific approaches explained in detail. [25]

The spatial-phenomenological methodology discussed in the book is about interrogating accounts of lived experiences, but in spatial structural terms. The author provides us with a thorough background about various traditions in phenomenology. In the index, there are more than 20 references to phenomenology (e.g., HEIDEGGER 1962 [1927]; LAING, 1959; LEWIN, 1948), hence phenomenology as philosophy and methodology is discussed throughout the book. DOWNES states that phenomenology, in the framework presented, focuses on lived experiences rather than a HUSSERLIAN¹ phenomenology of mind and intentionality. Referring again to BRONFENBRENNER (1979), DOWNES acknowledges his contribution of focusing not only on lived experiences but also on structural features of these human experiences. However, he goes on to explain that "this is being supplemented here by a distinct process of spatial phenomenology" (p.91). [26]

The objects of study in the approach suggested might be best concretized if referring back to DOWNES's assertion on page 49.

"Operationalized inferences regarding contrasts between concentric and diametric spaces on aspects such as relative connection/separation, relative openness/closure and symmetry provide an interpretative methodology for interrogating theory-laden data in spatial terms, data that may be obtained through empirical methods including through phenomenological accounts of lived experiences." [27]

The author deserves credit for presenting this interesting new framework and methodology and not least for the courage to challenge what is often taken for granted. Phenomenological concerns aiming to describe the world as it appears to the individual and the more causal trajectories from empirical psychology, are often being seen as incommensurable. The author does not, however, accept this traditional claim about incommensurability.

"Traditionally, phenomenological concerns and causal trajectories are like oil and water; they do not tend to mix. A more adequate understanding of phenomenological aspects requires the phenomenological and causal levels of explanation to be commensurable discourses, as supporting conditions for causal processes, rather than operating on parallel tracks of meaning" (p.198). [28]

1 The spectrum of traditions of phenomenology can be seen as growing from the original work of Edmund HUSSERL, who is referred to several times in the book without any direct reference. An example of a newer collection is HUSSERL (2008 [1950]).

4. Some Minor Recommendations

I mention in the overview of the book-structure the simple illustration in the introduction comparing and contrasting diametric and concentric dualism. As a reader, I must admit that I miss more representations such as models, diagrams, tables, and so forth in the book. Referring to the lack of tables—the last chapter actually ends with a table summing up key hypotheses for concentric and diametric spaces. I can follow the argument for this disposition, presenting the book as a preliminary exploration of these hypotheses and inviting further research; but still, as a reader, it could have been helpful with such diagrams providing an overview before the last chapter. [29]

5. Concluding Remarks and Perspectives

The key message from this review is that DOWNES's book can be recommended to researchers in a broad range of fields, both educational psychology and, for example, the field of professional learning where I have added a few perspectives and examples. The use of these additional examples mirrors the inspiration I have felt when reading the book. The term "thinking technology" can be used to describe a mediating "tool" which supports raising questions systematically but does not provide all the answers. The innovative framework of agency as movement between concentric and diametric spatial relations presented in this book is backed by an impressive range of references and examples but still presented in a way that opens up for further thinking and perspectives. Thank you for that. [30]

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Citation

Nielsen, Birgitte Lund (2020). Review: Paul Downes (2020). Reconstructing Agency in Developmental and Educational Psychology—Inclusive Systems as Concentric Space [30 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 21(2), Art. 23, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.2.3480>.